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You Can't Win an Argument

SHORTLY AFTER THE CLOSE OF WORLD WAR I, I LEARNED AN INvaluable lesson one night in London. I was manager at the time for Sir Ross Smith. During the war, Sir Ross had been the Australian ace out in Palestine; and shortly after peace was declared, he astonished the world by flying halfway around it in thirty days. No such feat had ever been attempted before. It created a tremendous sensation. The Australian government awarded him fifty thousand dollars; the King of England knighted him; and, for a while, he was the most talked-about man under the Union Jack. I was attending a banquet one night given in Sir Ross's honor; and during the dinner, the man sitting next to me told a humorous story which hinged on the quotation "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."

The raconteur mentioned that the quotation was from the Bible. He was wrong. I knew that. I knew it positively. There couldn't be the slightest doubt about it. And so, to get a feeling of importance and display my superiority, I appointed myself as an unsolicited and unwelcome committee of one to correct him. He stuck to his guns. What? From Shakespeare? Impossi-

ble! Absurd! That quotation was from the Bible. And he knew it.

The storyteller was sitting on my right; and Frank Gammond, an old friend of mine, was seated at my left. Mr. Gammond had devoted years to the study of Shakespeare. So the storyteller and I agreed to submit the question to Mr. Gammond. Mr. Gammond listened, kicked me under the table, and then said: "Dale, you are wrong. The gentleman is right. It *is* from the Bible."

On our way home that night, I said to Mr. Gammond: "Frank, you knew that quotation was from Shakespeare."

"Yes, of course," he replied, "*Hamlet,* Act Five, Scene Two. But we were guests at a festive occasion, my dear Dale. Why prove to a man he is wrong? Is that going to make him like you? Why not let him save his face? He didn't ask for your opinion. He didn't want it. Why argue with him? Always avoid the acute angle." The man who said that taught me a lesson I'll never forget. I not only had made the storyteller uncomfortable, but had put my friend in an embarrassing situation. How much better it would have been had I not become argumentative.

It was a sorely needed lesson because I had been an inveterate arguer. During my youth, I had argued with my brother about everything under the Milky Way. When I went to college, I studied logic and argumentation and went in for debating contests. Talk about being from Missouri, I was born there. I had to be shown. Later, I taught debating and argumentation in New York; and once, I am ashamed to admit, I planned to write a book on the subject. Since then, I have listened to, engaged in, and watched the effect of thousands of arguments. As a result of all this, I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument—and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes.

Nine times out of ten, an argument ends with each of the contestants more firmly convinced than ever that he is absolutely right.

You can't win an argument. You can't because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it. Why? Well, suppose you

triumph over the other man and shoot his argument full of holes and prove that he is *non compos mentis.* Then what? You will feel fine. But what about him? You have made him feel inferior. You have hurt his pride. He will resent your triumph. And—

> A man convinced against his will
> Is of the same opinion still.

Years ago Patrick J. O'Haire joined one of my classes. He had had little education, and how he loved a scrap! He had once been a chauffeur, and he came to me because he had been trying, without much success, to sell trucks. A little questioning brought out the fact that he was continually scrapping with and antagonizing the very people he was trying to do business with. If a prospect said anything derogatory about the trucks he was selling, Pat saw red and was right at the customer's throat. Pat won a lot of arguments in those days. As he said to me afterward, "I often walked out of an office saying: 'I told that bird something.' Sure I had told him something, but I hadn't sold him anything."

My first problem was not to teach Patrick J. O'Haire to talk. My immediate task was to train him to refrain from talking and to avoid verbal fights.

Mr. O'Haire became one of the star salesmen for the White Motor Company in New York. How did he do it? Here is his story in his own words: "If I walk into a buyer's office now and he says: 'What? A White truck? They're no good! I wouldn't take one if you gave it to me. I'm going to buy the Whose-It truck,' I say, 'The Whose-It is a good truck. If you buy the Whose-It, you'll never make a mistake. The Whose-Its are made by a fine company and sold by good people.'

"He is speechless then. There is no room for an argument. If he says the Whose-It is best and I say sure it is, he has to stop. He can't keep on all afternoon saying, 'It's the best' when I'm agreeing with him. We then get off the subject of Whose-It and I begin to talk about the good points of the White truck.

"There was a time when a remark like his first one would have made me see scarlet and red and orange. I would start arguing

against the Whose-It; and the more I argued against it, the more my prospect argued in favor of it; and the more he argued, the more he sold himself on my competitor's product.

"As I look back now I wonder how I was ever able to sell anything. I lost years of my life in scrapping and arguing. I keep my mouth shut now. It pays."

As wise old Ben Franklin used to say:

> If you argue and rankle and contradict, you may achieve a victory sometimes; but it will be an empty victory because you will never get your opponent's good will.

So figure it out for yourself. Which would you rather have, an academic, theatrical victory or a person's good will? You can seldom have both.

The Boston *Transcript* once printed this bit of significant doggerel:

> Here lies the body of William Jay,
> Who died maintaining his right of way—
> He was right, dead right, as he sped along,
> But he's just as dead as if he were wrong.

You may be right, dead right, as you speed along in your argument; but as far as changing another's mind is concerned, you will probably be just as futile as if you were wrong.

Frederick S. Parsons, an income tax consultant, had been disputing and wrangling for an hour with a government tax inspector. An item of nine thousand dollars was at stake. Mr. Parsons claimed that this nine thousand dollars was in reality a bad debt, that it would never be collected, that it ought not to be taxed. "Bad debt, my eye!" retorted the inspector. "It must be taxed."

"This inspector was cold, arrogant and stubborn," Mr. Parsons said as he told the story to the class. "Reason was wasted and so were facts. . . . The longer we argued, the more stubborn he

became. So I decided to avoid argument, change the subject, and give him appreciation.

"I said, 'I suppose this is a very petty matter in comparison with the really important and difficult decisions you're required to make. I've made a study of taxation myself. But I've had to get my knowledge from books. You are getting yours from the firing line of experience. I sometimes wish I had a job like yours. It would teach me a lot.' I meant every word I said.

"Well. The inspector straightened up in his chair, leaned back, and talked for a long time about his work, telling me of the clever frauds he had uncovered. His tone gradually became friendly, and presently he was telling me about his children. As he left, he advised me that he would consider my problem further and give me his decision in a few days.

"He called at my office three days later and informed me that he had decided to leave the tax return exactly as it was filed."

This tax inspector was demonstrating one of the most common of human frailties. He wanted a feeling of importance; and as long as Mr. Parsons argued with him, he got his feeling of importance by loudly asserting his authority. But as soon as his importance was admitted and the argument stopped and he was permitted to expand his ego, he became a sympathetic and kindly human being.

Buddha said: "Hatred is never ended by hatred but by love," and a misunderstanding is never ended by an argument but by tact, diplomacy, conciliation and a sympathetic desire to see the other person's viewpoint.

Lincoln once reprimanded a young army officer for indulging in a violent controversy with an associate. "No man who is resolved to make the most of himself," said Lincoln, "can spare time for personal contention. Still less can he afford to take the consequences, including the vitiation of his temper and the loss of self-control. Yield larger things to which you show no more than equal rights; and yield lesser ones though clearly your own. Better give your path to a dog than be bitten by him in contesting for the right. Even killing the dog would not cure the bite."

In an article in *Bits and Pieces,*° some suggestions are made on how to keep a disagreement from becoming an argument:

Welcome the disagreement. Remember the slogan, "When two partners always agree, one of them is not necessary." If there is some point you haven't thought about, be thankful if it is brought to your attention. Perhaps this disagreement is your opportunity to be corrected before you make a serious mistake.

Distrust your first instinctive impression. Our first natural reaction in a disagreeable situation is to be defensive. Be careful. Keep calm and watch out for your first reaction. It may be you at your worst, not your best.

Control your temper. Remember, you can measure the size of a person by what makes him or her angry.

Listen first. Give your opponents a chance to talk. Let them finish. Do not resist, defend or debate. This only raises barriers. Try to build bridges of understanding. Don't build higher barriers of misunderstanding.

Look for areas of agreement. When you have heard your opponents out, dwell first on the points and areas on which you agree.

Be honest. Look for areas where you can admit error and say so. Apologize for your mistakes. It will help disarm your opponents and reduce defensiveness.

Promise to think over your opponents' ideas and study them carefully. And mean it. Your opponents may be right. It is a lot easier at this stage to agree to think about their points than to move rapidly ahead and find yourself in a position

°*Bits and Pieces,* published by The Economic Press, Fairfield, N.J.

where your opponents can say: "We tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen."

Thank your opponents sincerely for their interest. Anyone who takes the time to disagree with you is interested in the same things you are. Think of them as people who really want to help you, and you may turn your opponents into friends.

Postpone action to give both sides time to think through the problem. Suggest that a new meeting be held later that day or the next day, when all the facts may be brought to bear. In preparation for this meeting, ask yourself some hard questions:

Could my opponents be right? Partly right? Is there truth or merit in their position or argument? Is my reaction one that will relieve the problem or will it just relieve any frustration? Will my reaction drive my opponents further away or draw them closer to me? Will my reaction elevate the estimation good people have of me? Will I win or lose? What price will I have to pay if I win? If I am quiet about it, will the disagreement blow over? Is this difficult situation an opportunity for me?

Opera tenor Jan Peerce, after he was married nearly fifty years, once said: "My wife and I made a pact a long time ago, and we've kept it no matter how angry we've grown with each other. When one yells, the other should listen—because when two people yell, there is no communication, just noise and bad vibrations."

PRINCIPLE 1

The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it.